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## ENGLISH EPITAPHS.

BY I. A. TAYLOR.

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DR. JOHNSON, in a contribution to the *Gentleman*, expresses his surprise that so little interest had been shown, at the time of his writing, in the subject of epitaphs. For since, as he observes a little grimly, while few indeed can expect to furnish matter for an heroic poem each one may confidently look forward to being recorded in an epitaph, it becomes no less the interest than the duty of every man to see that a branch of business in which he has so intimate and personal a concern is properly carried on.

It was possibly the motive suggested by the doctor which directed the labors of a very different writer, for there still exists, though a little out of sight, a thin and well intentioned volume, in which Mr. Augustus Hare, to meet a need and correct a scandal, designed to provide a collection of epitaphs by which the dead might be commemorated in more fitting fashion than he had found to be commonly the case. Whether the attempt, however praiseworthy, was one likely to meet with success is, it is true, doubtful. A shop for ready-made garments is not the place where men's living bodies are best fitted, and it does not at the first blush appear why the dead should be expected to range themselves in more convenient classes for wholesale and appropriate ticketing.

On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that Mr. Hare's purpose was not wholly concerned with the dead. In his opinion the object of an epitaph is threefold. It should indeed commemorate the departed, but it should also comfort the living, and teach a lesson to the general reader. And of these three aims one cannot but be conscious that the importance of the first is not a little subordinated to that of the remaining two, and that, even in this matter of sepulture, the living have been

given an undue advantage over the dead. Nor, whatever may be said of the generosity of the principle, can it be called less than just when we remember that each man's turn to take the second place awaits him, and that if his friend has distanced him in the involuntary race, it is certain that he himself, to borrow a phrase from one of these inscriptions, is "posting after."

In Dr. Johnson's opinion, at any rate, it was also the primary office of an epitaph to set virtue in the highest light, to exalt the reader's ideas and to rouse his emulation—to entrap unawares, in fact, the idle wanderer among the tombs, and compel him to confess that he has not, by remaining outside the church, escaped the sermon.

These, however, are but theories, and it is in the epitaphs themselves that must be sought the key to the place they have actually filled in the lives of men, to the longings and instincts of which they are the outcome and the result. And going to the epitaphs themselves, although the desire of reading a lesson to the living may find a more or less prominent place among them, there is surely another and more urgent craving to which the first rank should be given among the causes accountable for the innumerable monuments of the dead which cover the land. They are not merely so many school books or sermons in brief; they are, above and beyond these, the proclamation of a universal brotherhood, the cry of man to man, known and unknown, living or unborn, for pity, on the score of a common humanity, and a common mortality. "I was alive and am dead—be sorry for me," cry the dead. "I had and I have lost—be sorry for me," cry the living. And because—it is almost as if a menace entered in, and compassion were demanded at the point of the bayonet—because you will soon be in like case.

All through this literature of the graveyard the same appeal, for pity and remembrance, is made; whether with tragic dignity and poignant force; or through the doggerel, trite, or jesting, or pathetic, of a lower sphere; or even with the pedantic and lengthy grandiloquence which marks the panegyrics of the eighteenth century.

For whatever was the indifference complained of by Dr. Johnson, the time when he wrote was one when epitaphs were, if not at their best, at least at their longest; possibly indeed, since brevity was in his opinion most chiefly to be desired in such

commemorations of the dead, the very long-windedness of his contemporaries may have led him to wish to direct their attention to earlier and better examples of the art. If a man is great enough, it is an insult to his memory to be over explicit concerning his claims to remembrance; if deeds deserve to be remembered, they will be remembered; if not, let them be forgotten—such is the dictum of the stern old lexicographer. But this is surely to place too high an estimate on human justice, and those who set themselves to guard the memory of the dead may be pardoned if they prefer rather to act upon the warning of Sir Thomas Browne, that “the iniquity of oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy, and deals with the memory of men without distinction to merit of perpetuity.”

Whichever philosopher may be right, the eighteenth century, and to some extent the preceding one, was certainly a time when no one with any self-respect could be buried without taking the proper steps to let posterity—that posterity to which, surely by some mistake, Anne Spragge’s grave at Chelsea is declared “sacred”—know all that was to be known about him, without acquainting it with the list of his virtues, his talents, his bad fortune and his good. There indeed the register stops short, for with some noteworthy exceptions and so far as the better classes are concerned, a decent veil is drawn over the faults and follies of those who lie below: and when here and there we catch sight of something not commending itself to modern taste as wholly admirable, it is mostly accidental, and not due to any intentional or deliberate betrayal on the part of the biographer. If, for instance, the “Conjugal Affection” shown by Baptist Noel, Viscount Campden, to four wives, and his paternal indulgence towards nineteen children, for which astonishing record, achieved at the comparatively early age of fifty, he is held up to the “Admiration of his Contemporaries and the Imitation of Posterity”—if these items in his panegyric no longer strike the reader precisely as they were intended, that is not the fault of the composer, but of an alteration in public sentiment for which he is in no way responsible.

Anne Spragge, on the contrary, the singular dedication of whose grave has just been mentioned, had plainly forestalled modern ideas on more subjects than one. “For a considerable time,” it is recorded on her tombstone, “she declined the Matrimonial State, scheming many things superior to her Age and

Sex, and under the Command of her Brother, with the Arms and in the Dress of a Man, she approved herself a true Virago, by fighting at sea . . . against the French." Alas ! even Anne Spragge, before quitting this life, had suffered decline. She returned safe from that naval engagement only to fall a victim to fate like any common woman, to marry some months later, live half a year "extremely happy," die on the birth of her first child, and have a monument raised to her memory by a "disconsolate husband" !

Where crime was on so grand a scale as to constitute in itself a distinction the usual reticence was not, of course, observed ; and upon the marble stone beneath which were laid, on his execution, the remains of Claude Duval, the celebrated highwayman, his titles to honor are recounted with a fine disregard of conventional morality, in the lines which end, "Old Tyburn's Glory, England's illustrious Thief ; Du Vall, the Ladies' joy, Du Vall, the Ladies grief."

If, however, as far as *bona fide* tombstone inscriptions were concerned there was little but good to be learnt of the dead, the omission was amply supplied in those epitahs not intended for practical use, of which the composition constituted a distinct and favorite branch of literature. There are, indeed, few more signal and powerful examples of invective than are to be met with amongst them, as, for instance, in the magnificent arraignment of Francis Charteris by Dr. Arbuthnot, concluding with the words :

"Who with an inflexible constancy, and inimitable uniformity of life Persisted, In spite of Age and Infirmary, In the practice of every human vice——"

or, to cite an example in verse, in the four lines, not always to be found included among his works, by which Byron has rendered the memory of Castlereagh immortal :

"With death doomed to grapple,  
Beneath this cold slab he  
Who lied in the Chapel \*  
Now lies in the Abbey."

Whatever may be thought of the employment of such weapons against those no longer in a position to return the blow, there is a sort of justice in their use when they are turned, as in

\* The House of Commons was formerly St. Stephen's Chapel.

Bettersworth's lines, against such a past master in the art of invective as Swift himself :

" Here lies one Swift, one Harley's master tool,  
Spendthrift or wit, who died at length a fool,  
Who for his jest ne'er spared or friends or foes;  
He's gone—but where—the Lord of Oxford knows."

Of more brutal abuse the lines upon Coleman, a "plotting Papist" of the reign of Charles the II., may serve as an example:

" If Heaven be pleas'd when sinners cease to sin,  
If hell be pleas'd when sinners enter in;  
If earth be pleas'd when ridded of a knave;  
Then all are pleas'd, for Coleman's in his grave."

There were few literary men by whom the trade of epitaph writing was not in some measure plied, and Cowley, Waller, Dryden, and Pope had quite a crowd of lesser imitators. Sir John Beaumont was evidently popular in this line of business—a fact to which he draws attention in the lines on his "deare Sonne, Gervase," asking,

" Can I who have for others oft compiled  
The Songs of Death, forget my sweetest child ?"

a composition which contrasts curiously with that of Ben Jonson—another epitaph writer, but this time a poet too—on a similar occasion :

" Rest in soft peace, and, asked, say here doth lie,  
Ben Jonson his best piece of poetrie."

That the trade in epitaphs was by no means confined to London or to the higher grades of society, but existed in rural places as well, there would be no reason to doubt, even in the absence of such evidence to prove it as that furnished by the story which relates how Ralph Gittins, "*bell-man and epitaph-maker*," having been unwarily committed to prison by Sir John Bridgman, president of the marches of Norfolk, soon afterwards availed himself of the opportunity of vengeance afforded him in his enemy's death by the couplet,

" Here lies Sir John Bridgman, clad in his clay,  
God said to the Devil, — 'Sirrah, take him away.'"

The functionary entrusted with the duty of providing fitting tombstone inscriptions was, in fact, probably as indispensable an adjunct to village life as the sexton himself, the chief qualifica-

tions for the office being apparently a power of rhyming, ingenuity in the tricks of punning and word-play, with a certain amount of that broad humor which not infrequently strangely converted the memorials of the dead into elaborate jests. And if invention should run dry, there was doubtless a large assortment of stock verses from which it would go hard but an adaptation might be made to suit the case in hand. So at least go to prove the variations from common originals, such as the verse, which at seaside places record, with slightly different wordings how the dead sailor or fisherman or boatman has started on his last cruise, "our Admiral Christ to meet," or the varying forms of that most pathetic quatrain which in St. Paul's Cathedral relates of the sleeper below that

"Whether he laughed, whether he cried,  
Nobody smiled, nobody sighed ·  
Where he is, and how he fares,  
Nobody knows and nobody cares."

Sometimes, indeed, it would seem that the person charged with the task of adaptation was guilty of scamping his work. There is a stone in Cumberland raised in the fourteenth century by Deborah Harrison to her husband Augustus. But the name had proved too much for the local versifier, and the rhyme affixed stands thus :

"My husband lyeth dede  
Ondyr thys ston ,  
Dethe came to he, and seyde  
Oh ! Oh ! John."

While the broad characteristic of an appeal for pity and remembrance belongs alike to all ages, the terms of the demand naturally differ according to time and circumstance. In some of the earlier English epitaphs it is the dead themselves who cry from their graves for compassion and, with an urgency not to be mistaken, make their passionate appeal for help and succour. In the realization of their supreme necessity that of the living is forgotten :

"For God's sake praye to the Heavenly King,  
That he my soul to Heaven wolde bring ;  
All theye that Preye and make Accorde  
For mee, unto my God and Lorde,  
God place them in his Paradice  
Wherein noe wretched Caitiff lies."

Give and it shall be given to you—one observes the principle.

Nothing for nothing would seem to be an instinct in human nature, even under circumstances into which it would not have been expected to enter :

"In the yere of Christ, on Thousand Fowr Hundry'd ful trew, wyth fowr and Sixteen, I Richard Skypwith, Gentyleman in Birth, late Fellow of Newe Inne, In my Age Twenti on, my Soul party'd from the Body :

And now I ly her, abyding God's Mercy, under this Ston in Clay ;

Desiring you that this sal see,

Unto the Meyden pray for me,

That bare both God and Man,

Like as you wold that other for yee shold,

When ye ne may nor can."

Another characteristic of some of these early inscriptions is the tender commemoration, not only of the spiritual part of those lost to sight, but even of the fair qualities of the perishable body. Thus we read that Anne, the wife of Richard II., was "of a comely Person, and a mild, lovely countenance" ; and "monsieur Edward," the Black Prince, from his tomb in Canterbury Cathedral, after lamenting his past greatness and riches, goes on to complain :

" My Beautye great is all quite gone,

My Fleshe is wasted to the Bone,

My house is narrow now & thronge,

Nothing but Truthe comes from my tongue.

And if ye should see mee this Daye,

I do not think but ye wolde saye

That I had never beene a man,

So moche altered nowe I am !"

The explanation is not far to seek. In those days faith was strong. The body was not lost and done with forever, but only temporarily gone into eclipse. The very eyes that were shut would open again, the dust-filled ears hear, the "mild, lovely countenance" recover its old beauty. It was an age when the spiritual and material met and touched. The intimate, and, as it were, personal relationship between God and man, lingering on even to a later period, finds expression now in the half-apologetic mention of the honorable death of Humphrey Bourchier, only to be lamented because it took place on the day when Christ rose from the dead, like a funeral crossing a wedding party; now in the lines which, recording the death of Lettice, Countess of Leicester, on Christmas day, explains that

" Christ did to Heaven her soul convey  
To solemnize his own Birthday,"



with a glad confidence that the festival would receive additional grace from her presence.

Passing on from the earlier examples, the personality of the survivors becomes more apparent in the monuments they raise. The list of the virtues of Lady Joyce Lucy is "set down by him, That best did know what hath been written to be true"; Lord Godolphin's "much-obliged daughter-in-law" erects his tomb; a "Friend's Friend" is responsible for Walter Harris' monument at Chelsea; the mother of Esther, Lady Eland, "herself almost buried in Sorrows," makes her daughter's sepulchre; and the inscription upon Thomas Clere's grave at Lambeth ends with something like a sob—

" Ah, Clere! If Love had bootéd case or cost,  
Heaven had not won, nor Earth so timely lost."

About some early inscriptions there is an element of grim and uncompromising realism from which later times might shrink: "In this house, which I have borrowed of my brethren the worms, do I lye," says the sometime Bishop of the Isle of Man, from his tomb in his cathedral. "Reader, stop; view the Lord Bishop's palace and smile."

Equally distinct from the lengthy panegyrics of the eighteenth century and from the tender diffusiveness of other memorials, which seemed to take the world into the confidence of the mourner, is the poignant brevity of such inscriptions as the two words "Eheu, Evelina!" or such as these "Phillip Massinger, a Stranger;" as that of Wilkes on himself "A Friend of Liberty;" or, to take an example from fiction, "Alas, poor Yorick!" which, striking a single note, leave the rest a blank. Among such, though not coming under the head of English epitaphs, it is impossible to refrain from quoting the stone which, at Milan, simply adds to the name of the dead the words, "*Qui nunquam quievit, quiescit. Tace!*" Never quiet before, he is quiet now. Silence! Lest the restless spirit should wake and the restless brain begin to work. Surely the whole history of the man, in those few words, is told. "If he sleep he shall do well."

To the same category, so far as the note of singleness is concerned, though differing widely in other respects, belong such verses as the pitiful lines quoted by Nathaniel Hawthorne:

"Poorly lived, Poorly died,  
Poorly buried, And nobody cried,"

or the doggerel, alike pathetic and jocose, which in St. Alban's Churchyard tells how

"Hic jacet Tom Shorthose, sine tomb, sine sheets, sine riches,  
Qui vixit sine gown, sine cloak, sine shirt, sine britches."

The tone of stolid if not complaisant acquiescence in the nakedness of poor Tom's lot, past and present, contrasts with the inscription which, on Samuel Butler's tomb at Westminster, recounts that in order "that he who, when living, wanted almost everything, might not, after death, any longer want so much as a tomb, John Barber, citizen of London, erected this monument."

Such *post mortem* atonements are probably not infrequent, and it will never be known of how many sepulchres remorse has been the architect; but to have wanted "almost everything" was possibly too common a fate among the class to which Tom belonged to seem to plain country folk to demand any special after-death compensation.

It is probably with inscriptions of the type of these last—inscriptions, it must be confessed, not always restrained by decorum and often scurrilous or merry or scoffing—that Mr. Hare has his quarrel, though he may likely enough include in it such well-intentioned blundering as that perpetrated on the stone which, raised to the memory "of our beloved parents," adds the question, "What is home without them? Peace, perfect peace." And doubtless from his own point of view there is no little justification for the disapproval with which he views a large number of such memorials. And yet how ill could they be spared—how worse than inadequately would the quotations he suggests from such writers as Mrs. Hemans, Mrs. Barbauld, Bishop Heber, and the rest, supply the place of these epitomes of the life stories of those who lie beneath the stones. For here, as nowhere else, we are brought face to face with the past, till by a paradox it seems to rise, clothed in flesh and blood, from among the tombs.

Here, for instance, is Lady O'Looney, "bland, passionate and deeply religious. Also she painted in water colors and sent several pictures to the exhibition. She was first cousin to Lady Jones—and of such is the Kingdom of Heaven." A Paradise made up of persons of quality who dabbled in art!

And here is the hypochondriacal old maid "who'd many aches and fancy'd many more," and died at last, "leaving her Pothicary quite forlorn," and one Johnson, "a painful preacher";

and another clergyman, surely not less so, who composed 500 sermons and preached more than 5,000 times ! Here, too, is a couple who in death were not divided —

“She first departed, he for one day try’d,  
To live without her; lik’d it not, and dy’d,”

and a cheerful if arbitrary assumption on behalf of a “very wicked man” killed by a fall from a horse—

“Between the stirrup and the ground,  
I mercy ask’d, I mercy found.”

And here are babies, many and various; an “incomparable boy,” who died at birth; another who, having lived two years, tells us both why he came and why he left :

“The railing world turn’d poet, made a play,  
I came to see it, dislik’d and went away”;

and yet another infant, less easily persuaded of its good luck in dying, yet who, after some demur, allows itself to be convinced.

And then here and there among the rest, commonplace or jesting or trite, is struck some note, weird or discordant, like the verse in the Cornish churchyard :

“Here I lie without the walls,  
Because there is no room within,  
They kept such brawls;  
Here I lie and have no rent to pay,  
And yet I lie as warm as they.”

Was it at the dead Lords of the Manor, arrogating to themselves sole right of burial within the sacred precincts, that the thrust was made, with its allusion to Death, the Leveller ? However that may be, over respect for the dead was no invariable rule. Once leave behind the classes and places where decorum and grandiloquence reigned and a marked change is observable with regard to the sins and follies of those who are gone; and there is no lack of mention of them, whether in a spirit of coarse buffoonery or of deprecating apology. Thus we are told, in negative terms of condemnation, that under the stone at Cheshunt,

“Lies the body of Richard Hind,  
Who was neither ingenious, sober nor kind;”

and at Great Cornard, in Suffolk, that,

“Here lies the body of Joe Sewell,  
Who to his wife was very cruel,  
And likewise to his brother Tom  
As any man in Christendom.  
This is all I’ll say of Joe,  
There he lies and let him go.”

One wonders why, since nothing better could be said of poor Joe, the survivors, doubtless wife and brother, should have been at the trouble and expense of raising a monument to commemorate his shortcomings, but they were not singular in the course they took, nor are other records of unhappy marriages wanting.

“Cy gist ma femme, fort bien  
Pour son repose ce pour le mien”

Is a couplet at Old Greyfriars, Edinburgh, as trenchant, though more laconic than the verse at Midhurst which records that—

“Beneath this stone  
Lies my wife Joan,  
To H—ll she’s gone, no doubt;  
For if she be not,  
If Heaven’s her lot,  
I must (God wot) turn out.”

An elaborate play upon words was a favorite form of memorial when the name of the dead invited such punning; and there is in Lincoln Cathedral a cheerful forecast as to the future lot of a divine named Cole. “*Cole now raked up in ashes then shall glow,*” and a more sinister quatrain elsewhere in memory of one Sullen:

“Here lies John Sullen, and it is God’s will  
He that was Sullen, will be Sullen still.  
He still is Sullen: if the truth you seek,  
Knock until Doomsday, Sullen will not speak.”

In Horace Walpole’s manuscript there is a copy of an epitaph of the kind to be found near Salisbury, on a person named Button:

“O Sun! Moon! Stars! and ye Celestial Poles!  
Are Graves then dwindled into Button-holes.”

A joke based upon the profession practised by the dead was also a popular form of memorial. A blacksmith was thus said to have been “hotly employed in the service of his country. . . . He made a great noise in the world till . . . death put out his fire, and here are laid his dust and ashes”; the reader is reminded, in lines commemorative of a huntsman, that

“The leap though high, from earth to sky,  
The huntsman we must follow;”

and a billiard marker was said to be gone “for the long rest.”

Nor were inscriptions of the kind confined to country places. The epitaph of Havard the comedian ends with the lines,

“The noblest character he acted well,  
And Heaven applauded—when the curtain fell.”

The fashion of the world changes, and the trade of the epitaph-maker grows slack. Here and there, it is true, some one is still honored after the old custom, but for the most part a text, appropriate or the reverse, a brief record of birth and death, a word or two of vague and general significance, with possibly a simple expression of regret, have replaced in our modern cemeteries those shorthand histories of the dead, tragic or humorous, tender or severe,

“Some stained as with wine, and made bloody,  
And some as with tears,”

which formerly marked their resting places.

It is not that in these later years men have lost that craving for remembrance which, as old as life itself, is so vain, in the case at least of the commonality of the race, that it might well be a subject for laughter were it not that what, seen from without is purely grotesque, assumes quite another complexion when it is touched by our own personality. It is not that the desire to be remembered is gone, and it is likely enough that in some fashion or another we should all still be epitaph-makers, for ourselves or other people, if we had not lost faith in the permanency of the work. But time brings involuntary wisdom. “Our fathers find their graves in our short memories, and sadly tell us how we may be buried in our survivors.” “While I live,” promises a lover, with melancholy truthfulness, in a Roman epitaph quoted by Mr. Pater—“while I live you will receive this homage: after my death, who can tell?” And so it comes to pass that, submitting to the inevitable, men learn to limit their aspirations, and to content themselves, by way of epitaph, with the “two narrow words, *Hic jacet*,” with which, says Sir Walter Raleigh, “eloquent Death” covers all.

I. A. TAYLOR.